

AAVE: Questions for Class Discussion

Break students up into groups to discuss a set of questions. A speaker from each group will present the group's findings to the rest of the class.

1. How do you think kids learn to talk?
2. How do you know how to walk?
3. Do you think you cannot help but learn to talk?
4. How come you know how to speak? How did you learn your language?
5. Can you remember the first moment when you *knew* language?
6. Do you think language is part of your genetic makeup?
7. Do you think you take language for granted?
8. Is it possible that grammar could be biological and innate?
9. What does the following quote by Steven Pinker mean to you: "People know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs" ?
10. If I were to tell you there was such a thing as "Universal Grammar", how would you define it?
11. How would you define "Human Language"?
12. How do you define a sentence of English?
13. How do you know what is a good meaning for a word?
14. What is a dialect?
15. How would you feel if I were to tell you there was no such thing as a dialect?
16. Of the over 5,000 languages in the world – they are all dialects of one language: Human Language. What does this statement mean to you?
17. Where does your language come from?
18. Do you think language is connected to your identity?
19. How much of your self-esteem is tied to your language?
20. What do you think "sociolinguistics" is? What is it the study of?

21. Do you feel you adapt the way you speak depending on the social situation?
22. Do you think language today is deteriorating?
23. In his book *Word on the Street*, John McWhorter makes the following statements. What does each statement mean to you?
 - a. A 'standard dialect' is a dialect with an army and a navy.
 - b. Language is like a lava lamp.
 - c. Language is a self-cleaning oven.
 - d. A printed passage in a language is like a Polaroid snapshot of a person, a fleeting image of an organism always in transformation.
24. Do you think English is the standard language? If so, do you think other varieties of language are sub-standard?
25. What is African-American-English?
26. What does the word "vernacular" mean?
27. What is Ebonics?
28. Does it bother you to hear other people speaking in a different language or dialect?
29. Do you ever code-switch, or incorporate words from other languages into your language?
30. Do you think our society is prejudice to other languages?
31. Do you think English is deteriorating?
32. Do you think it is important to acknowledge a common language?
33. Is Russian a complex language?
34. Is African-American Vernacular a complex language?
35. Do all languages have rules?
36. Do you think there are an infinite number of sentences you can create (if grammar has a finite set of rules – are the amount of sentences you can create with those rules infinite)?
37. Is there such a thing as a "primitive language"?
38. Is power associated with language?
39. How can the study of language (linguistics) help us understand ourselves?

40. How can the study of language help us understand our culture(s)?
41. Does language define us uniquely as human?
42. Do all people see the world in the same way?
43. What are the sources of modern language?
44. Are there “primitive” languages?
45. What, if anything, do human languages share?
46. How do people use language to build social relationships?
47. According to DNA scientists, there is no such thing as “race.” Do you think what we call “race” is socially constructed?
48. Maya Angelou often writes in AAVE, yet she does not agree that AAVE should be taught in schools. Why do you think she is “against Ebonics”?
49. Why is it that when writers incorporate AAVE in their writing, they are considered “intellectuals” yet when students speak AAVE on the street, their language is often viewed as sub-standard?
50. Non-traditional, color-blind casting is very popular today. Often African-American actors are cast in roles traditionally played by white people (i.e. Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekov, etc.) Do you think audiences would be accepting of a white actor playing an African-American role in a play (i.e. August Wilson’s drama)? Why or why not?
51. Why in Germany are both Swabisch and Hoch Deutch (two varieties of language) treated on equal footing in schools? Why do they not have the language “problem” we have here in America (i.e. Oakland Resolution)?
52. Do you think all languages incorporate the following?:
 - a. Noun / Verb
 - b. A way to ask a question
 - c. Method to indicate difference between one and more than one (singular / plural)
 - d. A way to make something negative
53. Can you name any African-American writers?